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Introduction: Running in Sofia, Bulgaria

Over the last decade, in Sofia the capital of Bulgaria, there has been an increase in the numbers of people participating in recreational running: this is running for exercise and leisure. This increase has been most evident in the establishment and expansion of running clubs that organize different types of running events. This growth of running is impressive. Since the end of state-socialism in 1991 funding for sports facilities, programs, and public health education declined sharply (Giatzidis 2002). Countries from Eastern Europe have lower rates of physical activity participation compared with other European Union (EU) states (Filippidis et al 2016). This correlates with Bulgaria, where participation in physical exercise is low: 80% of Bulgarians do not participate in any physical activity (Eurobarometer 2014)¹.

To think through the growth in running this paper examines the 5km Run club and the Begach Running Club. The 5km Run Sofia has grown steadily since inception in 2012 and the Saturday morning event regularly features over two hundred runners². It is a free-to-enter run that is held throughout the year in South Park (Yuzhen Park – see figure 1). The Begach Running Club organize running events that regularly feature over six hundred runners, this includes the Sofia Morning Run (in the Borisova Gradina – see figure 1) and the Business Park Run, clinics, seminars, and initiatives founded upon the principle of developing running infrastructure and charity fundraising. The two recreational running clubs are not-for-profit groups that raise awareness of physical health and aim to promote the practice of running. It is through the endeavors of the running clubs that running has become more prominent as a means of exercise and daily activity in Sofia. Taken together these two clubs, both of whom operate without the requirement of registered membership, are examples of autonomous social groups that endeavor to enliven urban life through running.

The aim of this paper is to develop a deeper understanding of the recreational running clubs in Sofia. This paper argues that the running clubs act to emphasize the playful, utopian, and affective capacity of running to make running more popular, visible, and accessible to all. The paper is organised as follows. I first review how the growth in running and as a sensuous practice has been explored in the literature, this includes sociology, geography, and sports health. I then outline the methodology of the study and a brief history of Sofia, before turning to the question of recreational running clubs and how they utilize concepts of autonomy, play, and utopia, drawing on the arguments of thinkers including Nancy (2000), Cooper (2014), and Markula (2014). This demonstrates how the running clubs in Sofia harness the potential of running to encourage physical activity in the city. Finally, in conclusion I outline some of the wider implications of the study for understanding recreational running.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Recreational Running: a burgeoning activity

The growth of running across Europe has led to an increase in both organized and non-organized running. Marathons, fun runs, and charity events are symbols of dynamic and attractive urban centers (Latham and McCormack, 2012). Attempting to understand the numbers is a challenge of comprehending the changes in practices and lifestyles, and how to plan resources and facilities effectively. The growth is discussed by Scheerder et al (2015) who have focused on available numerical data to explore running as a popular phenomenon. In their edited collection *Running Across Europe* data from eleven European countries is analyzed to addresses issues of participation, governance, and health³. This work establishes a picture of mass participation with over 50 million runners of different levels of dedication across the continent. This presents social policy challenges and economic opportunities. In doing so the authors question the role of traditional clubs to harness the potential of recreational running.

The running boom that Scheerder et al describe has been in part driven by perceived health effects that are premised upon the casting of the inactive body as an object of disease. In doing so it is underpinned

by the notion of the afflicted body as the individual's responsibility of being at risk of illness (e.g. diabetes, obesity, cardio-vascular disease). Running for exercise is positioned as a technique to reduce such risks, conduct a healthy lifestyle, and establish a positive body image (Shipway and Holloway, 2010; Shipway and Holloway, 2016). A popular method of starting running is through recreational events, such as ParkRun a widespread movement, that is open to all participants without requirements for skill, age, or experience. The sense of community encourages non-runners and under-represented groups: women, older adults, and overweight people participate (Stevinson and Hickman, 2013). The inclusive ethos, achievement opportunities, and park based or semi-rural settings have helped maintain participation (Rogerson et al, 2015; Stevenson et al, 2015). However, the decision to partake in exercise is not straightforward rational decision making and the act of running is not easily defined without recourse to the sensations that arise in participation.

Recreational Running: a sensuous practice

Running is an emergent process of sense-making that draws an effortful cartography of the runner's environment. Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2011) suggest that different sporting activities produce specific haptic experiences and competencies. In this way, running provides a somewhat correlated set of embodied experiences and practices to walking as it is about motion and the body becoming entangled within a field of action (Middleton, 2009, 2010). As such, running is experienced across the full spectrum of senses: touch, taste, sound, vision, and balance (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Allen-Collinson and Leledaki, 2015). For example, surface texture has been found to be a critical part of maintaining exercise practices (Brown, 2016) and running indoors gives rise to specific contemplative and physical sensations (Hitchings and Latham, 2016). Bale (2004) argues that running invokes a certain sense of escape and of losing oneself⁴, producing of an ambiguous body culture as running becomes more serious. Bale identifies the place-based and place-less notions of running that are bound up with running on a track or in an arena. This is positioned in contrast to running in natural environments that afford more reflective body cultural experiences and afford perceived health benefits (Little 2016)⁵.

In attending to the sensations that lie outside of achievement sport, running has the potential for creating other concepts or other worlds. Markula (2014) has explained how practices of physical fitness that are removed from the individuality of neo-liberal ideals have the potential to unsettle bio-political regimes that nudge people to have primary care for their own health responsibility. Recreational running offers a counter point. In thinking about developing a knowledge of the body, how it works, moves, and feels, Markula from working with yoga suggests this establishes ways of thinking about health and fitness other to the production of a better looking and illness-free body. Markula (2014: 486) concludes that such an approach demonstrates "how an exercise form can be problematized and then used in an attempt to change the current field of fitness". In focusing on the corporeal sensations, movements, and collective affects Markula's work resonates with recreational running clubs and the activities they promote. It also draws attention to the multifaceted nature of a physical practice like recreational running.

Methods: site and project

The current population of urban Sofia is 1,543,377 (National Institute of Statistics, 2015) and as the capital city, it is wealthier than the rest of the country. Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007 but is still the poorest member state. The country has seen many changes since the end of state socialism in 1991: economic, social, and political changes as the country faced massive devaluation of its currency and severe recession. This included challenges to the legal status of state institutions (e.g. the national bank and the constitutional court) by politicians and former Socialist party officials (Ganev, 2007). Since the 1990's Sofia has witnessed deindustrialization, economic depression, and recently a move towards a services and out-sourcing economy. Spatially there has been an increase in gated communities along with retail spaces and suburban housing developments on the outskirts (Hirt, 2012; Stanilov and Hirt, 2014).

Post-socialist urbanism, while not a universal concept or timeframe, is often characterized by the neglect and privatization of public space, declining civic attitudes, and an increased sense of individualism (Holleran, 2014). The changes over the period in Sofia have brought about development in the urban fabric from a centralized model of planning to a fragmented approach where new and decaying infrastructure are in close conversation. This presents many challenges for people wanting to exercise. However, the presence of parks and green space also offer opportunities. The compact size of Sofia makes such spaces easily accessible without private transport. In addition, the higher levels of income and education are correlated to better health provision and personal health practices (Dimova et al, 2014).

The data for this paper is drawn from an ongoing project based in Sofia that started in September 2013 that examines the practices of recreational running and use of urban space. The two main fieldwork visits September 2013 to May 2014 and May 2016 to March 2017 have been supported by regular return visits to the field site in the intervening periods. The project focuses on the two recreational running clubs introduced in the introduction: Begach Running Club and 5km Run Sofia. The Begach club was established in 2008. A recent event, the Sofia Morning Run, held in October 2015 attracted over 670 participants running 5, 10, or 20km. The 5km Run Sofia is a regular Saturday event in Sofia and attracts over 200 participants weekly. The 5km Run is free of charge and runners can register or run anonymously.

The project employs qualitative methods. This includes participant observation of recreational running, qualitative interviews with running club participants and club organizers, and running diary-interviews. Participant observation was employed as a mean of attending to day-to-day use and experience of urban space (Burawoy, 2009). This included running in organized events and participating in the informal running scene in Sofia. There are in total 36 participants: 16 female and 20 male. Ages ranging from 19 to 48 years (the running club organizers interviewed were both male aged 34 and 45). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was conducted using Nvivo11 to identify key themes.

The participants in the study were from different backgrounds including primary and secondary education, web-development, legal and financial sectors, sales and business analyst, and university students. This also included different amounts of educational experience – from high school diplomas to university degrees. The participants had lived in Sofia for different amounts of time. Half had lived in Sofia since childhood. Nine had lived in other European countries and four had lived in America. The social-economic status (SES) of the group was mixed. None of the group was from the lowest SES group. The participants were drawn from predominately professional jobs that they identified on participant forms. This is indicative of a group that is more representative of Sofia than Bulgaria more generally. The running experiences ranges from beginners (6 months or less) to experienced (5 years or more). All participants are Bulgarian. All names are pseudonyms

Recreational Running Clubs and Running Events

The recreational running clubs in Sofia are attempting to adhere to the idea of developing running through participation, engagement, and animating the city. The groups want to establish running as an everyday activity that is part of exercise routines or daily mobility. The ethos underpinning such ideas is to help engender more active lifestyles, more inclusive public spaces, and more sustainable practices. The ways that the clubs operated became apparent through the interviews and participant observation of running in Sofia. Three key areas emerged from the data. First, autonomous social groups and the idea of being-with highlights how such efforts foster pluralistic ways of being and encourage people to participate in public events (Nancy, 2000). Second, the development of everyday utopian practices draws out how subtle actions of ‘building and forging new forms of experiencing social life’ underpins

efforts to bring new ways or ideas of living into reality (Cooper, 2014). Third, the playful nature of the running events work to animate urban space and relationships, spark new lines of ethical generosity, and challenge accepted forms of mobility and activity (Stevens, 2007). The three areas feed into one another as expected as they share an affinity in harnessing collective affects and sparking new worlds.

Autonomous Social Groups

In this paper autonomy is a sense of connection with likeminded others, a “collective spirit which rejects individualism in favour of mutual aid, solidarity and collective experience” (Chatterton 2005: 546). The running clubs are emblematic of autonomy as a collectivity, the desire to embrace a collective project that envisions new ways of communal life that are premised upon notions of association. Socio-spatially Pickerill and Chatterton (2006: 1) define autonomous as “those spaces where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organisation through a combination of resistance and creation”. This is echoed by Gibson-Graham (2006) who approach autonomy as a range of spatial practices that draw on co-operation. The notion of autonomous social groups speaks to a diverse range of practices and spatial processes that look beyond neo-liberal market-centric ideology. The premise is to build connections on an equal footing that promotes the collective experience over the individual.

A key foundation is the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. In particular, his ideas set out in *Being Singular Plural* (Nancy, 2000: 42), in which he advocates a collective ontology which rests on the principle of existence as a Being-in-common, “to want to say ‘we’ is not at all sentimental, not at all familial or ‘communitarian’. It is existence reclaiming its due or its condition: coexistence”. The crux of Nancy’s argument is the provocation to explore the meaning and encounters of the many ways that beings are in-common, and relatedly, the all sorts of techniques and spaces that have the potential to engender more ethically responsible sites and ways of living. Nancy’s work is therefore essential in rethinking the individual as the focus and centre point of ethical agency at the expense of the plural nature of being.

The two running clubs and their respective events encourage the idea of being-with others. This isn’t simply through the co-location of other runners. Rather, and in following Nancy, it is through the very ethos that the clubs operate. The applause for all the runners and the same sense of appreciation at their running demonstrates that it isn’t about simply recording the best time. The runners are participating in a collective vision of urban life. Maria is a relatively experienced runner and she explained that the clubs encouragement and participation helped to create a space that is about joining with many different others that come to share this experience of running,

“The morning run is a good experience. To see the others who like running and want to do it together. I like the running when it is through the alleys and sharing the park. The community sense or ethos helps to keep me interested” (32 years old, less than 3 years running)

In this way, the clubs are adhering to Nancy who defines the nature of being-with through encounter: communitarian spirit and equality among all beings. Being and being-with is fundamental to all existence (co-existences), in equal measure. Therefore, the vision of the world Nancy holds is developed through the understanding of difference in multiplicity, “The origin of the world occurs at each moment of the world. It is the each time of being and its realm is the being-with of each time with every (other) time” (2000: 83). This is a broadening of Derridean and Deleuzian understanding of difference to fully focus on the being-with instead of just being, based within the understanding that being is among a multitude of others instead of in opposition to a singular other (Bingham, 2006). As a new runner Evgeny premised his continued participation upon the feeling of running with others rather than running by himself,

“I think the events work well because winning the race isn’t the main thing. I think it is about taking part and make a big grouping. There is a saying about participation as the point and it is

here. Running in events is much better for me than trying to run alone” (38 years old, 1 to 2 years running)

Nancy isn't alone in exploring and expressing the 'with' or 'co-' of being. Actor network theory has been widely adopted across the social sciences as a tool for more sensitive ethical approaches to socio-politico-cultural relations (Latour, 2000). For Maffesoli (1996) the running clubs are an example of the new formations that have developed among people in late-capitalism. In *Time of the Tribes* Maffesoli explains that old structures of community have been replaced by less concrete and more transitory connections. This includes through brand associations or single issue groups. However, and as Evans (1997) argues, Maffesoli's thesis is one-sided and is a product of a weak understanding of modernity that is not able to account for the possibility of social and political critique. More fruitfully is Negri (2004) who argues for thinking about a re-visioning of being among other beings and uniting this with the potential of affect. His ideas stem from a vitalist ontology and ethics, which are in turn, developed through the work of Spinoza⁶ (Popke, 2009). The thought behind Negri's work is directed towards an ambition at propagating novel types of events and encounters, and a broadening of the variety of affects which bring forth more communal, pluralistic ways of living alongside one another.

The running clubs establish a setting that is developed around the encounter of different bodies⁷. The 5km Run Sofia brings together over two hundred runners each week in the city's Yuzhen Park (South Park). In doing so the run is organised around the idea of bringing people together, to share the space of the run and to share in their activities. Boris, a club organizer, remarked in 2013 the lessons they learned as they introduced the running club on a Saturday morning,

“We have learnt that we need to get the runners to either run a route that everyone can see each other or a couple of laps so people feel they are running together. It is important for people to feel like they are running together especially in the shorter distances. People need to be able to share experiences of running in a group, otherwise it is not good for people to get together. People have many options in Sofia so we need to show them this is an activity they can do, in short time, that is fun, and with other people. We ask all runners to wait and clap and cheer all other finishers and the marshals encourage on the route too” (45 years old, more 5 years running).

Therefore, the very nature of the groups is founded on principles of openness and autonomy. Their aim is to create a space for the infusion of such relations through the everyday practice of running. The events are open to all abilities and are free to join (especially with regard to the 5km run Sofia. Begach's larger event carry a small fee which is used to pay the municipality for use of public parks and streets, these costs are being reduced through sponsorship). The events are informal and there are no requirements on joining any organisations. Runners can run without recording their names or times. Participation is not required every week, runners are able to pick and choose when they want to attend. It is also a spatial orientation, the bringing together of bodies creates an interconnection that encourage people who participate or are caught up in the event through watching or helping in its arrangement. Runners go away and speak to colleagues at work or neighbours and spread their experiences. Atanas has been involved with the running club since it started in 2010. He explained in 2014 how they sought to encourage new runners,

“the approach we have taken is based through events and social media. We use photos and videos to spread the idea of running. We also give away prizes and only offer a voluntary membership if you want to help us going. We like to think of our group as public good, we are open to everyone, we offer seminars on some special things like nutrition if people are interested but really we are just a group of people who see the promise in running for health, for the city, for everybody really” (34 years old, more than 5 years running).

Everyday Utopianism

The running clubs and the willingness of people to participate is not only correlative with the notions of being with others that the work of Nancy and autonomy speaks to. The organisers of the running clubs and the runners themselves are also participating, together, in the creation of more pluralistic urban worlds. There is a strain of utopianism that runs through their desires to make cities more inhabitable to all groups and open to moving bodies of different capacities. The idea of a utopian vision for life dates to Thomas More in 1516 who wrote about a radically different society. More proffered a hopeful vision of equality among all citizens not defined by wealth. Utopianism as a concept is concerned with imagining life otherwise. Levitas (1990) argues that social dreaming, desire, and hope are the foundations of utopian approaches. A key writer on the topic, Bloch (1986) introduces abstract and concrete utopias to distinguish between more active utopian visions. Abstract utopias are fantasies that make the contemporary liveable. Concrete utopias anticipate and attempt to instigate possible futures. Therefore, utopia rests upon exploring the changing interests, desires, and forms of embodiment which propagate as people (or any form of life) discover, nurture, and experience different ways of existing (Levitas, 2013).

The running clubs are practicing a subtle form of viable utopian desire. Cooper (2014) explores this sense of utopia through groups covering a diverse range of practices that aim to establish a more communal, less hierarchical, and more democratic way of life without over throwing a dominant system. Cooper defines the efforts of groups, such as, community trading networks, democratic schools, and state equality initiatives as everyday utopias. This contrasts with other work on utopias that focus strongly on idealism, emphasising the importance of radical transformation of social existence, where “attention is directed towards major social relations structuring the world” (2014: 30). In looking to unpick how utopias are enacted in the spaces of everyday life, Cooper focuses on how utopian spaces “work by creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new forms of experiencing social and political life” (2014: 2).

The running clubs are working to create new forms of social life through physical acts. They also share an affinity with Markula (2014) as they work to promote physical fitness that are premised upon the collective experience over individual health responsibility. Boris as an organiser explained their approach succinctly, “We are open to all and everybody. This isn’t racing, it is running for enjoyment together” (45 years old, more 5 years running). Similar sentiments were expressed by the runners. Kosta a new comer to the clubs explained that the open vision was attractive, “I like the free nature of clubs, that anyone can come and go, but I also like the relaxed atmosphere and that attitude towards different people” (29 years old, 1 year running). While Danil, an experienced runner, compared the clubs to wider society in representing a better vision of life, “It’s sort of an ethical point of view, the clubs do not have any barriers to women, old people, or even different races [ethnicity] which isn’t always the case today” (46 years old, 3 to 5 years running).

A key aspect to everyday utopias is how Cooper draws attention to change. Cooper is interested in exploring the thinking processes, both imaginational and material, of utopian innovation. Central to the conceptual framework is the importance of material practices and spaces. As my research diary notes the running clubs,

“have made a space that is about operating as an open club that is reliant upon voluntary organisation, working with different groups to encourage access and continue operations. The clubs use the moving bodies and transitory events to animate parks or neighborhoods where they hold events to help spread running and through social media. The running clubs are open to all comers. It doesn’t matter how serious or how many times they run, who they are or where they are from.” (Fieldwork Diary, June, 2015)

The clubs in Sofia work to create a utopian atmosphere through their events in two ways. First, materially by bringing into relief people and bodies of all sorts of speeds and slowness. Second, spatially by foregrounding the heterogeneity of space and social diversity. They foster this idea of an urban world that is predisposed to moving bodies through their events that are visible public acts. The Begach club in particular emphasize this approach. Their runs are bigger, but less frequent. Their morning run in 2016 attracted over 670 runners in Borisova Gradina (Central Park). Not only do the club organisers want to improve the general situation for running in Sofia, they also want to establish running as a public activity. As club organiser Atanas explained, it is through the creation of a joyful event that they want to spread physical activity to establish their vision of urban life,

“We want to make running a public happening...part of our ethos at events is that everyone gets recognition. We applaud everyone, give everyone a medal, and announce people’s names as they run past. We have to make people feel part of an event of joy” (34 years old, more than 5 years running).

Playful Urban Spaces

The sense so far has been that autonomous as collective and everyday utopias both feature a notion of playfulness that is part of animating the activities of the clubs. One way the running clubs are encouraging these visions is through the sense of fun of their events. They are enacting a playful vision through a turn to the affective and the non-representational. This turn towards the ludic has potential across urban contexts. Play has generally been considered as beneficial for childhood development (Brown and Gottfried, 1985) and as having no purpose outside of this realm or for serious life (Huizinga, 1949). Being playful holds promise in animating urban space: think of the free to play pianos or table tennis facilities in squares or plazas and the subtle shifts in atmosphere they generate⁸.

The problem of a lack of engagement with the potential of ludic geographies lies in seeing playfulness in these two discrete categories, outside of or opposite to expectations of reasonable and rational adult behaviours. Stevens (2007) argues, through his work on play in urban public spaces, that fundamentally play is part of, and not opposed to, everyday life. It is essential to all sorts of urban worlds. Play, for Stevens, helps to reveal the possibilities that urban public spaces afford. Particularly through its non-functional uses that have been exposed by practices like parkour (Saville, 2008; Mould, 2009), skateboarding (Borden, 2001), and BMX riding (Spinney, 2010), and their performative practices of inhabiting of urban public space. The sense of play was experienced by Micheale who is new to running. The sense of being active and participating in a joyful event drew her into participating. She explained in summer 2016 this sense of play,

“It is the carnival atmosphere of the events, music and things like that. Loudspeakers to read out names of runners, lots of colour and noise. People are drawn to see what is happening. Normally the parks are pretty quiet, especially in the morning time, so the runs change the area, they make it more of an active place. I think this helps in the smaller parks, people start to think maybe I can run here or do other sports stuff in my area” (38 years old, 1 years running)

In thinking through mass participation running events Cidell (2007) explores this sense of play and appropriation of urban space that act as a transgressive form of mobility. Play is also about sensation that precedes conscious awareness and is involved in the moment of becoming that lies outside the subject-individual conception. These sensations emanate from the propinquity, perception, and contingency of collective embodied experience (Malbon, 1999). This has close parallels to descriptions of marathons by amateur runners who in this moment of becoming line up in a mass of other bodies and experience a collective sense of closeness with all others. They become submerged in a field of affectual intensity whereby they are caught by the ‘moment’ and give in to the rhythms, push and pull of the event. In Deleuzian terminology this is attainable by becoming, by branching out to become-with objects, bodies, and the time-space of the event (Woodyer, 2010). Anna had only taken up running in

Spring 2016. She discussed the sensation she experienced when she ran with the running club in the Summer,

“I am not a great runner, I’ve only recently started to run, so for me it is not about going so fast or even checking times afterwards. The events are organised in a way that I feel the energy. I am gathered with all these people that normally you never see out running but we are together. The energy somehow transmits to each other and to others in streets or parks or wherever the runs are happening. They have helped keep me running” (19 years old, less than 6 months running)

The art of being playful is not contradictory to either adult life or life-course development. Being playful correlates with attempts at being utopian and autonomous. It resonates with styles of being that lie outside of neo-liberal visions that structure contemporary society. Woodyer (2012: 322) argues for the “critical and ethical potential of playing more explicitly. This can be traced in two ways: firstly, it relates to playing as a form of coming to consciousness and a way to be otherwise, and secondly it relates to the cultivation of ethical generosity. By refracting aspects of society, play is a vehicle for becoming conscious of those things and relationships that we would otherwise enact or engage without thinking”. However, and correlated to the previous paragraph, play is difficult for adults to talk about. In the fieldwork participants expressed the notion of fun or having fun as a way of discussing the playful nature of the running events. Ivan, who struggled to stay motivated, explained the potential of running and play,

“A group like this would help my running motivation during the week. I hope to start a group of runners in my neighbourhood....it would make us use the streets better. This would be really nice, a really happy feeling. It will so different to running alone or even travelling to work by car. It would make it more fun”. (29 years old, 3 to 5 years running)

Finally, the running clubs attempt to give play to affective tendencies. A common example that is seen around the world is the colour run⁹. This is a type of running event that has spread throughout the world. The idea is to use brightly coloured paint to cover clothing and bodies in order to generate an extra sense of playfulness into the running event. The colour animates the field of relations among the runners and the space of the run through the use of these painted bodies and fabrics. The degree of playfulness through the event establishes a milieu of emergence of new relations even in this modest way. The colour run helps to instil a sense of wonderment in an everyday practice. Vanya commented in Spring 2016 that the run animated the park as much as the people,

“I just love the color run; it is so much fun. I get this sense of being in just a state of happiness. It is super fun and a bit crazy. The people in the park laugh and smile along with you and everyone is making noise and being a bit silly. Everything is covered in bright colors! It makes the running not the main part of it” (35 years old, 2 years running).

Other running events include the use of music that is carried by runners and ‘fancy-dress’ races that require runners to put on costumes. These are further iterations at playing with the affective tendencies of running, bodies, and the event. The running clubs’ efforts in Sofia are laudable in operating with open disposition and give rise to future urban worlds that are defined by their autonomous desire, everyday utopian vision and playful approach.

Conclusion: grasping running clubs and animating urban worlds

The growth in running and running clubs have changed the physical activity environment in Sofia. The running clubs are best understood as autonomous social groups that emphasize the utopian and playful capacity of running to make running more popular, visible, and accessible. The three themes overlap with each other in this paper. This speaks to the difficulty in nailing down the ephemeral nature of both running and running events that animate mood, space, and bodies sparking new lines of expression and participation. They represent the foundation upon which the clubs are attempting to animate physical exercise participation in Sofia. Autonomous social groups and the idea of being-with highlights how

they foster pluralistic ways of being, establishing new events and enlarging the types of affects that people are capable of (Nancy, 2000). The idea of utopian practices draws out how subtle actions of 'building and forging new forms of experiencing social life' underpins efforts to bring new ways or ideas of living into reality (Cooper, 2014). While playfulness is an essential aspect of animating urban worlds (Stevens, 2007). The running clubs echo Markula (2014) by focusing on the corporeal sensations and collective affects that running affords as a way of approaching exercise without recourse to bio-political regimes that prioritize certain notions of fitness and beauty.

This isn't about reifying the actions of two running clubs. Rather, it is about a way of thinking through the actions of such groups to help inform physical activity participation in other cities. In foregrounding participation, movement, and all types of bodies the running clubs promote sustainable urban spaces that are defined by their openness to corporeal movement. They are suggestive of ways to develop practices outside of classifications of bodies as being at risk of disease and mediated visions of fitness. This isn't simply about running. Rather, this is about how to encourage different visions of urban life. It is about fostering different kinds of urban relations through an openness to collective subjects and moving bodies.

The implications of this study are the interest in running and the potential of running clubs works on a number levels to encourage participation. In terms of Sofia, recreational running and running clubs are working to make running an acceptable activity that is a part of daily exercise and mobility. In doing so the club organizers open a space to encourage physical activity. In a wider view, the work of the recreational running clubs presents a means or potential through which to harness an interest in health promoting practices by making events easily accessible, fun, cheap, and not time consuming. In Sofia the clubs are operating in an area where state provision is limited. The study findings can be seen in a general context to help explore the techniques of participation in running. The study can inform other small to medium sized cities and studies of the elements and experiences that are involved in participating and staging recreational running events.

The limitations of the study are the sample of participants and the location. The sample is reflective of a small to medium sized European capital city that does not correlate easily with the country in which it is located. This is correlated with understanding the challenges faced by citizens throughout the rest of Bulgaria to participate in physical activity. The challenges Bulgaria's second, third, and fourth cities (Plovdiv, Varna, and Burgas) as well as in more rural places are many and plural. This is equally true of the socio-economic, educational, and cultural specificities that are bound up with living in these places. Therefore, further research is required in two areas. First, recreational running clubs in cities across eastern Europe to examine how, when, and why people are running and in what forms of events or groups. Second, more qualitative research in other cities in Bulgaria to see if the running club's endeavors have led to a major uptake in running throughout the country.

Notes

¹ This is correlated to high mortality of cardio-vascular disease: two-thirds of death is due to CVD in Bulgaria (Dnevnik 2016).

² 5km Run Sofia organisers explained that it was through living in London that they first saw a ParkRun in Finsbury Park. On returning to Sofia they decided to establish a similar event in the city. However, the 5km Run Sofia is not affiliated with the global ParkRun movement that was founded by Paul Sinton-Hewitt in 2004 that is premised on a weekly, free to run 5km race.

³ See Latham (2015) for an historical overview of the emergence of 'jogging' as a fitness practice

⁴ See Cook et al (2015) for the meanings, experiences and spatialities of recreational road-running

⁵ See Eichberg (2002) on returning to nature and body culture in physical exercise

⁶ Spinoza (1996) defines affect as the capacity of body (human or non) being able to affect and be affected by another body. It requires an encounter, a state of already being immersed in the world in one way or another.

⁷ See Wilson (2016) for a socio-geographical review of encounter

⁸ See Koch and Latham (2013) for techniques of domesticating urban space.

⁹ It was founded by Travis Snyder in March 2011, as a way to encourage experienced and beginners to run together for fun and to promote healthiness and happiness. It is owned and operated by The Color Run LLC, a for-profit company. The run is not timed and has no winners or prizes. Participants are showered with coloured powder at the beginning and during the run.

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